ECHOES IN THE DARK: WAR, TECHNOLOGY, POSTHUMAN REIMAGININGS IN ANTHONY DOERR'S *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*

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Abstract:

The paper aims to examine the intricate relationship between war, technology, and human subjectivity in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. Situating the analysis within posthumanism perspectives, the paper explores how Doerr's narratives challenge traditional humanist assumptions by foregrounding the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces in times of crisis. War, in the novel, is not a historical backdrop but a transformative condition that reshapes the boundaries of the human, exposing vulnerability, fragmentation, and interdependence.

The paper argues that technology, especially radio communication, functions as a crucial mediating force that redefines perception, connection, and survival. Through the experiences of characters such as Marie-Laure and Werner, technological systems emerge not simply as tools but as active agents that influence human choices, ethics, and identities. These mediated interactions destabilize the notion of autonomous subjectivity and instead propose a distributed model of agency, where human existence is shaped through networks of objects, sound, and material environments. The paper explores how sensory experiences, particularly sound and blindness, reconfigure ways of knowing and being, challenging ocular-centric models of understanding.

Keywords: Posthumanism, War Literature, Technology and Mediation, Human–Nonhuman Entanglement, Subjectivity, Sensory Perception, Anthony Doerr

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr is a critically acclaimed novel set against the backdrop of the Second World War, one of the most devastating conflicts in human history. The narrative unfolds through the parallel lives of Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl, and Werner Pfennig, a German orphan with an exceptional aptitude for engineering. As the war intensifies across Europe, their lives gradually converge in the besieged French town of Saint-Malo. By situating individual experiences within the broader historical catastrophe of World War II, Doerr foregrounds the ways in which war disrupts, reshapes, and redefines human existence. The novel explores the intimate, often invisible effects of war on perception, memory, and identity, revealing how large-scale violence penetrates the most personal dimensions of life.

Doerr's narrative style is marked by its lyrical prose, fragmented structure, and shifting perspectives, which collectively mirror the disorientation and fragmentation produced by war. The novel employs short, interwoven chapters that move across time and space, creating a mosaic-like narrative that resists linear progression. The structure not only reflects the unpredictability of wartime experience but also emphasizes the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate lives. His attention to sensory detail, particularly sound, silence, and touch, challenges the dominance of visual perception, especially through the character of Marie-Laure. At the same time, Werner's engagement with radio technology introduces a parallel exploration of communication, control, and the ethical complexities of technological knowledge.

> When the Nazis occupy Paris, Marie-Laure and her father must flee to Saint-Malo to live with her great-uncle. Meanwhile, Werner is saved from working in the mines and trains to be in the German army because of his uncanny ability to build and fix radios. When Werner is tasked with hunting down the resistance with his radio skills, he will eventually make his way to Saint-Malo where his and Marie-Laure's paths cross.(Hand)

The concepts such as war, technology, posthumanism, and the reimagining of the human become essential to understanding the novel's deeper philosophical implications. War functions as a transformative force that destabilizes conventional notions of identity and autonomy, exposing the fragility and vulnerability of the human condition. Technology, particularly in the form of radio transmission, operates not merely as a tool but as a mediating force that connects, manipulates, and redefines human relationships and perception. From a posthuman perspective, these elements collectively challenge humanist assumptions of independence and centrality, instead presenting the human as embedded within networks of nonhuman agents, material objects, and sensory environments.

Posthumanism emerges as a critical framework that interrogates and reimagining the centrality traditionally accorded to the human within Western philosophical thought. Thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, and N. Katherine Hayles have significantly contributed to this discourse by challenging humanist assumptions of autonomy, rationality, and supremacy. Braidotti conceptualizes the posthuman subject as a relational, embodied, and embedded entity, constituted through dynamic interactions with both human and nonhuman forces. Similarly, Wolfe critiques anthropocentrism by emphasizing the ethical and ontological implications of extending consideration beyond the human, particularly in relation to animals, systems, and technological networks. Hayles, in her seminal work, foregrounds the ways in which information, embodiment, and technology intersect, arguing that the human cannot be understood outside of its imbrication with technological systems.

Modern warfare is deeply intertwined with technology, from communication networks to surveillance mechanisms, which mediate perception, control, and action. War, cannot be understood solely as a human endeavour, it is a site where human and nonhuman forces converge, producing new configurations of subjectivity and agency. Technology not only amplifies human capabilities but also reshapes the conditions under which individuals perceive, act, and survive.

> Cheap radios were also important for the war effort in Britain, although for different reasons. Thanks to records such as rationing stamps and unusual wartime recipes, many of us are aware of food shortages across the UK during the Second World War. However, the stress of war meant that supplies were short for everything—including the parts used to make radio receivers.(Television and radio in the Second World War)

The novel presents war not as a historical backdrop but as a transformative force that actively shapes identity and existence. The Second World War, as depicted in the novel, permeates every aspect of life, restructuring not only physical landscapes but also the inner worlds of individuals. One of the most striking consequences of war in the novel is the fragmentation of both selfhood and experience. Doerr's narrative structure itself, composed of brief, shifting chapters, mirrors this disintegration, reflecting a world where continuity is constantly disrupted. Characters experience a breakdown of stability, as familiar environments are destroyed and ethical boundaries blurred. The constant threat of violence, displacement, and loss underscores the precariousness of human existence. Survival, becomes the primary mode of being, often requiring characters to navigate morally ambiguous situations.

The impact of this condition is particularly profound in the lives of children, as seen through the characters of Marie-Laure and Werner. Marie-Laure's experience of war is mediated through her blindness, which heightens her reliance on sound, touch, and memory. Her vulnerability is intensified by the surrounding chaos, yet she also demonstrates remarkable adaptability, constructing alternative ways of navigating a fractured world.

Werner, on the other hand, is drawn into the machinery of the Nazi regime through his technical abilities. His identity becomes entangled with the very systems that perpetuate violence, illustrating how war can co-opt individual potential for destructive ends. Both characters embody the ways in which childhood innocence is disrupted, as they are compelled to confront ethical dilemmas and existential uncertainties far beyond their years.

> War is death and devastation. But, war is also the loss of innocence, mostly the loss of innocence, the hardening of the soul. The uneasy status quo that nothing matters

> anymore, no one cares anymore. War transcends humanity, plunging us into the deep end of the quagmire, the cesspool where nothing is wrong but nothing is right either.(Murali)

Doerr destabilizes the notion of a 'stable human' grounded in autonomy, coherence, and moral certainty. Instead, it reveals the human as inherently fragile, contingent, and shaped by external forces. The boundaries of identity become porous, as individuals are continuously redefined by their interactions with violence, loss, and survival.

Radio technology occupies a central position in the novel, functioning as both a material object and a symbolic force that shapes the narrative's exploration of war, perception, and human connectivity. Technology emerges as a dynamic and mediating presence that structures relationships, influences decisions, and redefines the boundaries of human experience. The radio, in particular, becomes a crucial site through which the interplay between communication, power, and subjectivity is articulated.

At one level, radio technology operates as a medium of connection, enabling forms of communication that transcend geographical and physical barriers. The broadcasts that traverse unseen airwaves create an invisible network linking individuals across spaces marked by war and destruction. For Marie-Laure, the radio represents access to knowledge, comfort, and continuity, offering a sense of connection in an otherwise fragmented world. The disembodied voice that reaches her becomes a source of orientation and emotional sustenance, suggesting that technology can foster relationality even in conditions of isolation. This capacity of the radio to bridge distances underscores its role in reimagining human interaction, allowing individuals to participate in networks that exceed immediate physical presence. "the distributed cognition of the emergent human subject core lates with-in Bateson's phrase, becomes a metaphor for-the distributed cognitive system as a whole, in which "thinking" is done by both human and nonhuman actors" (Hayles 290).

The same medium that enables connection is also instrumentalized for surveillance, propaganda, and the consolidation of power. Werner's involvement in tracking illegal radio transmissions reveals how technology becomes embedded within systems of authority and coercion. His technical expertise is harnessed to locate and suppress dissent, demonstrating how technological knowledge can be appropriated by institutional structures to regulate and discipline bodies. The radio exemplifies the dual nature of technology.

> The radio purrs and the woman laughs and Herr Siedler looks almost nothing, Werner decides like his neighbors, their guarded, anxious faces – faces of people accustomed to watching loved ones disappear every morning into pits. His face is clean and committed; he is man supremely confident in his privileges… "Good with tools," Herr Siedler is saying. "Smart beyond your years. There are places for a boy like you. General Heissmeyer's schools. Best of the best. Teach the mechanical sciences too. Code breaking, rocket propulsion, all the latest." Werner does not know where to set his gaze. "We do not have money".(Doerr 84)

Werner's relationship with machines further illustrates the complex entanglement between human identity and technology. From a young age, Werner exhibits an almost intuitive affinity for mechanical systems, particularly radios, which shapes his sense of self and his trajectory within the narrative. His engagement with technology is not purely instrumental; it becomes a defining aspect of his subjectivity. Technology in the novel is a passive tool. The radio does not simply transmit human messages, it shapes the conditions under which communication occurs, influencing how individuals perceive, relate, and act. It mediates sensory experience, restructures spatial relations, and participates in the production of power. By foregrounding the agency of technology, the novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions that privilege human control and intentionality.

Doerr constructs a narrative world in which human existence is inseparable from its interaction with objects and spaces. The novel foregrounds a dense network of relationships between human characters and nonhuman elements, material objects, built environments, and war-torn landscapes. Doerr imbues them with narrative significance, allowing them to shape human

perception, action, and identity. “Doerr captures the sights and sounds of wartime and focuses, refreshingly, on the innate goodness of his major characters” (“All the Light We Cannot See”)

The role of space, particularly the city of Saint-Malo and the war-ravaged environments that surround it. The city is not merely a setting but a dynamic participant in the narrative, shaping the movements, limitations, and experiences of the characters. Its streets, buildings, and hidden passages become sites of navigation, concealment, and survival, especially for Marie-Laure, whose understanding of space is mediated through memory and touch. War transforms these spaces into ruins, altering their meanings and functions. The destruction of physical environments reflects and reinforces the fragmentation of human identity, as characters are forced to adapt to constantly shifting and unstable surroundings.

These interactions exemplify the posthumanism concept of distributed agency, wherein action and influence are dispersed across a network of human and nonhuman actors. Agency in the novel does not reside solely within individual characters; rather, it emerges from the interplay between people, objects, technologies, and environments. “a zoe-centred way, requires a modicum of goodwill on the part of the dominant party, in this case anthropos himself, towards his non-human others” (Braidotti 88). Decisions and outcomes are shaped by this complex web of relations, making it impossible to attribute causality to a single, autonomous subject. For instance, Werner’s actions are not only a product of his personal choices but also of the technological systems he operates, the institutional structures he serves, and the material conditions of war.

The novel reimagines the perception by foregrounding sensory experiences that challenge the dominance of vision. Through the character of Marie-Laure, a blind protagonist, the novel destabilizes ocularcentrism, the privileging of sight as the primary mode of knowing, and instead constructs a sensory world shaped by sound, touch, memory, and spatial awareness. Blindness becomes a transformative mode of engagement with the environment, enabling alternative ways of perceiving and understanding reality in the novel.

Marie-Laure’s experience of blindness necessitates a heightened reliance on non-visual senses, particularly sound. Her world is structured through auditory cues, the rhythm of footsteps, the texture of voices, the distant reverberations of war, which together create a richly layered sensory landscape. Sound becomes a means of orientation and survival, allowing her to navigate unfamiliar and often dangerous environments. Listening is an active and interpretive, requiring attention, memory, and adaptation. The radio, too, plays a crucial role in shaping her auditory experience, extending her perception beyond immediate surroundings and connecting her to distant voices and narratives. Through these elements, Doerr emphasizes that perception is not confined to sight but is a multisensory process that can be reconfigured under different conditions.

> Six blocks, thirty-eight storm drains. She counts them all. Because of the sheets of wood veneer her father has tacked over its windows, their apartment is stuffy and hot. “This will just take a moment, Marie-Laure. Then I’ll explain.” Her father shoves things into what might be his canvas rucksack. Food, she thinks, trying to identify everything by its sound. Coffee. Cigarettes. Bread?.(Doerr 76-77)

Equally important is the role of silence, which operates alongside sound as a meaningful and often charged presence. Silence in the novel is not simply the absence of noise, it is imbued with tension, anticipation, and vulnerability. For Marie-Laure, silence can signal danger or uncertainty, requiring careful interpretation. At the same time, it creates spaces for reflection and heightened awareness, where subtle sensory details become more perceptible. The interplay between sound and silence thus forms a complex sensory dynamic that shapes her interaction with the world. “Now everything in the house scares her: the creaking stairs, shuttered windows, empty rooms. The clutter and silence”(Doerr 226).

By centering a blind protagonist, the novel fundamentally challenges visual dominance as the default framework for knowledge and representation. Ocularcentrism, deeply embedded in Western thought, assumes that seeing equates to knowing, privileging clarity, distance, and objectivity. Doerr disrupts this assumption by demonstrating that vision is neither neutral nor sufficient. Marie-Laure’s perception, grounded in proximity, touch, and sound, offers an alternative epistemology that is

embodied, relational, and context-dependent. Her way of knowing resists abstraction and instead emphasizes intimacy with the material world. Perception is a dynamic and situated process. Through its emphasis on sound, silence, and non-visual experience, the novel reimagines the sensory foundations of human understanding, challenging entrenched hierarchies and opening up new modes of being in the world.

All the Light We Cannot See, presents a profound reimagining of the human by bringing together the intersecting forces of war, technology, materiality, and sensory experience. The human in the novel emerges through a complex web of relationships that continuously shape and redefine its existence. War destabilizes identity, technology mediates perception and action, objects and spaces participate in meaning-making, and sensory experience challenges normative frameworks of knowledge. These elements produce a vision of the human that is fundamentally relational, vulnerable, and technologically mediated.

Human identity in the novel is deeply relational, constituted through interactions with both human and nonhuman forces. Characters such as Marie-Laure and Werner do not exist as isolated individuals; their identities are formed through their engagements with technologies like the radio, material objects such as the Sea of Flames diamond, and the environments they inhabit. These relationships are not incidental but constitutive, shaping how characters perceive the world, make decisions, and understand themselves.

At the same time, the novel foregrounds the vulnerability of the human condition. War exposes the fragility of life, dismantling structures of security and coherence, while also revealing the limits of human control. Characters are subject to forces, historical, technological, environmental, that exceed their individual capacities. The openness of the human to external influences allows for adaptation, resilience, and connection, even in the most precarious circumstances.

These dimensions collectively mark a decisive shift from the autonomous individual to the entangled subject. Traditional humanist models, which emphasize independence, rationality, and self-determination, are rendered insufficient in the face of the novel's complex networks of interaction. Instead, Doerr presents a subject that is distributed across relationships, shaped by forces that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and environment. Agency, identity, and perception are no longer confined within the individual but are produced through ongoing processes of interaction and exchange.

> posthumanism … is thus analogous to Jean- François Lyotard's paradoxical rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture) of which Bernard Stiegler probably remains our most compelling and ambitious theorist— and all of which comes before that historically specific thing called "the human" that Foucault's archaeology excavates.(Wolfe xv)

Doerr's writing does not simply depict the effects of war and technology on human life, it fundamentally rethinks what it means to be human in a world defined by entanglement and mediation. By dissolving the illusion of autonomy and foregrounding relationality, vulnerability, and technological integration, the novel offers a compelling vision of the human as always in the process of becoming, shaped by the visible and invisible forces that surround it.

War is a transformative condition that fragments identity and exposes the limits of human control. Technology, particularly radio, functions as both a medium of connection and a mechanism of control, actively shaping perception, agency, and ethical decision-making. Furthermore, the novel's engagement with objects, spaces, and sensory experience reveals a distributed model of agency, where human existence is inseparable from the material and technological networks within which it is embedded.

The key findings of the paper underscore that Doerr's narrative destabilizes the notion of a coherent and autonomous subject by foregrounding the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman forces. Through characters such as Marie-Laure and Werner, the novel illustrates how identity is

continuously formed and reformed through interaction with technology, environment, and historical circumstance. The emphasis on sound, silence, and non-visual modes of perception further challenges dominant epistemologies, offering alternative ways of knowing that align with posthumanism critiques of sensory hierarchy.

The paper attempts to contribute to posthumanism scholarship by extending its theoretical concerns into the domain of war literature, demonstrating how literary narratives can illuminate the reimagining of subjectivity in technologically mediated and conflict-driven contexts. Through posthumanism lens such as distributed agency and human–nonhuman entanglement to the novel, the paper highlights the relevance of these frameworks for understanding contemporary representations of the human. At the same time, it tries to contributes to war literature studies by offering a perspective that moves beyond conventional themes of heroism or trauma.

Future work could extend the analysis of comparative studies exploring similar representations of technology and subjectivity across diverse cultural or historical contexts. By continuing to bridge literary analysis and posthumanism thought, such inquiries can further illuminate the evolving understanding of the human in an increasingly interconnected and technologically driven world.

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